

Angels Among Us
Christmas Eve 2011

According to the November 9, 2011 edition of the New York Times, angels are appearing in the border city of Juarez, Mexico. They are over ten feet tall with white robes and feathered wings. There is even a picture of one of these angels – with a golden face. The one thing that surprised me about this particular angel was the sign he was holding. It said simply, “murderers repent.”

One year ago, at a little Christian church on a dirt road, young people expressed their frustration with the relentless violence around them and wanted to do something – something bold – something hard to miss. They named themselves “Messenger Angels” They persuaded city officials to donate old curtains that became angelic robes. They raised money for makeup and collected feathers for wings. Then they wrote up signs that by and large speak directly to criminals and corrupted officials.

At first the Messenger Angels focused on busy intersections. They stood silently on folding chairs for extra height, their robes draping to the ground. Then they started going to crime scenes, risking their lives to make their silent statement.

The Messenger Angel idea is now catching on in other dangerous cities. Their leader, just 33, hopes that somehow, eventually, they will help bring peace. He is quoted as saying, “the idea is to keep going – we have to.”

As I read the article I tried to imagine a 15-year old boy, dressed as a 10 foot tall angel, standing on the blood soaked ground of unimaginable violence. I guess my first response was, “I don’t get it.” What good does that accomplish? All the angels I have been reading about lately brought good news of great joy. But this angel had only a determined look on his face, as if he was immovable and his message hardly seemed like good news.

Five weeks ago when we began the journey of Advent, I resolved to keep an open mind about angels. I set out to preach on each of the four annunciation stories surrounding Christ’s birth; first to Zechariah in the temple, then to Joseph in a dream, then to Mary in her innocence, and finally to the shepherds in the fields. I’d never really thought much about the angels in all those stories. I learned that the word “angel” means messenger. That word, “messenger” is easier for me to comprehend. I’ve never seen Gabriel, or the heavenly host, but I can embrace the idea that God uses messengers to speak to us.

Shirley Richardson told me her story. On the day of her husband’s passing, an angel stood watch in the corner of the room. Numerous people saw it, including staff. If I didn’t know Shirley I might be inclined to think they were delusional with grief. But I know Shirley and I believe. I don’t have to understand it.

Richard White told me his angel story, only his angels had flesh and bones. The angels he described were the care givers who so lovingly care for his mother in the nursing home. Several of you told me you'd seen those angels too.

I saw angels flitting in and out of the room of Ilene Phipps as she laid in intensive care on a ventilator. With gentle touch and comforting words these angels, dressed as nurses, kept their watch – and then hospice angels took over. I don't know if they know they are angels or not. When they go home at night I doubt their spouses say, "you are an angel!" And yet in the midst of anxiety and brokenness they deliver a message of compassion and presence.

The more mindful I became of angels in all their forms, the more I began to see them and hear about them. We had an angel tree covered with 90 angels – each angel representing someone in need. One by one the angels were adopted. Two weeks later a mountain of gifts appeared at church, carried in on the arms of angels. And the message delivered to those in need was, "someone cares."

I read about layaway angels. When Meghan Huffy was unable to meet the December 16 deadline to pay off her layaway at Walmart she called the store. She asked if there was any way she could come in the next day to pay it and pick up her items. The clerk, name Paula, said, "Unfortunately, no."

Five minutes later, the young mother received a call back from Paula. She identified herself and asked, "Do you believe in angels?" Paula went on to tell her that a woman had just come in who had it on her heart to pay off someone's layaway – someone who had toys for their children.

In Destin, Florida a man walked into a Walmart with a check for \$2,700 and paid off every outstanding layaway in the store. "To God be the glory," he said as he walked out of the store. Isn't that the song that angels sing??

Mary Johnson had the idea to hold a silent auction at our church to raise funds for a person in need. She motivated folks to make beautiful items to sell. When it was said and done we collected over \$1,000. We put it in our NET fund and used it to give some good news. I had the privilege of being the bearer of that good news to someone in need of good news.

Five days a week angels deliver hot meals to seniors around our community. They smile and offer kind words as they dash from house to house. I get to see angels every day and they look like Beulah Desenberg, Kathy Pierce, Tom Anderson, and Phil and Marty Weaver. They haven't sprouted wings – by my do they get around.

I visited Shirley Liles this week and she is surrounded by angels. Good friends, caring neighbors, and church family have ministered to her as she battles cancer – providing rides, meals, companionship, even walking her dog. If you want to see angels coming and going, walk by Shirley's house.

This week I went Blank Children's hospital to visit a 21 year-old woman from Norwalk and her 1 year-old daughter. The child has a terminal condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy. In the room, a social worker was on the phone with DHS trying to figure out why this young woman, unable to work because of her daughter's hospitalization, could not get food stamps or any assistance. I introduced myself and asked the young mother what she needed. She said food, rent, and help with utilities. I told her that I thought she needed some good news and I could get her rent paid, get her some food, and possibly more. (I could say that because I know your generosity.) She looked at me like, "you don't even know me." Her January rent was paid the next day – all I had to do was tell one angel that someone needed a message of grace and comfort.

The more I paid attention – the more angels I saw – and I started to notice a common theme. Angels seem to show up in barren places and in times of distress. Angels stand where death and darkness looms. Angels greet us with good news when bad news threatens to undo us. With all that is wrong in our world – the violence – the illness – the poverty – the sorrow – angels continue their work of delivering messages of good news in some of the most unlikely places.

That's what the Messenger Angels of Juarez do – they take good news to horrendous crime scenes and deliver the message that God has not given up. They stand tall and strong, as symbols of what is good and right, in the midst of a whole bunch of things that are wrong and broken. They confirm what we desperately want to believe – that God is still with us – in flesh and in spirit.

That is what we celebrate this evening – a God who comes to us – a God who sticks with us – a God of flesh and bones. We will pack baby Jesus and the shepherds away till next year – but the message remains – God is with us.

Who knew that angels carry purses, drive cars, shop at Walmart and take blood pressure? I think what I learned this Christmas is that angels still come and say, "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy!" With all that is wrong – God still sends messages of good news.

I now know that there are angels among us and sometimes they look just like you and me – and they give us hope – and peace – and joy – and love – and for a moment all is calm and all in bright.

Amen